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# Can You Love More Than One Person at the Same Time? A Research Report

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“Caught between two lovers and I love them both the same”

—Mary Wells, “Two Lovers,” 1962

**Abstract:** The contemporary U.S. American model of love is that it is essentially a dyadic bond between two and only two individuals. Out of this bond arises feelings of eroticism, passion, and companionship which somehow merge together to form a unified conceptual whole. Co-existing with this ideal is an alternative model that survives in the popular medium of films that holds out the possibility of simultaneously loving two people at the same time. Our study was designed to explore how individuals caught in a concurrent love bond experience and managed their relationship(s). Implications of our findings are discussed below.

**Keywords:** dual love, sex differences, U.S. society, polyamour

**Résumé :** Le modèle nord-américain contemporain de l'amour consiste en un lien essentiellement dyadique entre deux et seulement deux individus. De ce lien émergent des sentiments d'excitation érotique, de passion et de camaraderie qui fusionnent parfois pour former un tout conceptuel unique. À côté de cet idéal, un autre modèle subsiste dans le médium populaire qu'est le cinéma, qui illustre la possibilité d'aimer deux personnes simultanément. Notre étude a été conçue pour explorer comment des individus pris dans des liens d'amour simultanés vivent l'expérience et gèrent leurs relations. Les conséquences de nos conclusions sont exposées ci-dessous.

**Mots-clés :** amour en double, différences entre les sexes, société états-unienne, polyamour

## Introduction

The contemporary U.S. American model of love is that it is essentially a dyadic bond between two and only two individuals. Out of this bond arises feelings of eroticism, passion, and companionship that somehow merge together to form a unified conceptual whole. Co-existing with this ideal is an alternative model that survives, if not thrives, in the popular media of films and literature that holds out the possibility of simultaneously loving two people at the same time. Given that the U.S. American model embraces both romantic passion and companionate love necessary components of an ideal relationship, it is reasonable to assume that some individuals may seek an alternative path to achieve this ideal if they cannot find both in one person.

The idea of a simultaneous or concurrent love is also an emergent philosophical position. This position argues that the greatest love is not a dyadic bond but rather a concurrent love with multiple partners. In support of their position, advocates of concurrent love repeatedly point to the frequency of extramarital love affairs, the worldwide institutionalization of the mistress, and the prevalence of the polygynous family system as all suggesting that humans are not a monogamous species (Barash 2002; Giles 2004). More recently, the appearance of polyamour “marriages” are noted as further evidence of not only the ability but also the willingness of some individuals to enter into and maintain strong concurrent love relationships (Anapol 1997; Kipnis 2000; see overview in Wolfe 2003).

Although novelists and artists have probed some of concurrent love's psychological nuances, psychologists have been remarkably silent in forming research designs to determine how individuals feel about and manage

multiple relationships. Psychologists' reluctance to investigate concurrent love relationships may stem from their deep seated cultural assumption that it is highly improbable for anyone to truly love two people at the same time. For example, Sternberg (1997) notes that a concurrent love may be sustained provided the individuals involved create separate and distinctive narratives of how their love was formed and what it means to the individuals involved. This allows the individual to create different roles for themselves in the relationship as well as for their lovers and so fulfill different desires. Sternberg speculated that these narratives will be hierarchically arranged to help individuals manage their often conflicting emotions arising from competing emotions and resources invested in a concurrent love relationship. Concurring, Sternberg et al. (2003) suggest that if a concurrent love is possible it would seldom be intentional, planned, or expected. Moreover, it would always result in a painful internal conflict.<sup>1</sup>

If passionate or romantic love is organized around emotional exclusivity that includes the reordering of an individual's motivational priorities (Jankowiak 1995; Jankowiak and Ramsey 2000; Jankowiak et al. 2005), what then is the effect of becoming emotionally (as opposed to sexually) involved with more than one person? Secondly, do individuals who insist they are involved in a concurrent love develop a similar level of intimacy with both lovers or do they, albeit tacitly, rank their lovers along a continuum of emotional significance? Finally, how do people involved in a plural love relationship manage potentially troubling issues of loyalty and exclusivity that have disrupted so many love inclusive communes and most contemporary "open marriages"? Are our respondents attempting to achieve the U.S. American cultural model of the ideal love relationship through a mechanism that also violates the mandate that it be dyadic through accessing a model suggested in modern literature and popular media? To this end, our study was designed to understand whether it is possible, as Wells eloquently states in our opening quote and as the popular media and literature suggest, for human beings to be deeply in love the same way with more than one person at the same time.

## Methods

We began our study somewhat cautious of the idea that a concurrent love is possible. Initially, we suspected that individuals were bracketing or shifting affectionate, and thus motivational, hierarchies between the two lovers. Thus, what appeared to be co-loves would be in actuality nothing of the sort. Our interview posture was polite and respectful but cautious. We needed to be

convinced that individuals were deeply caught up in a simultaneous or concurrent love. To this end, we noted body language, statements or expressions of emotional angst, and the strength of a person's conviction that they held deep-seated affections for two lovers. We found an open interview approach a more productive means for obtaining subjective information. Individuals were remarkably insightful and self-reflective in describing their various experiences of being caught between two lovers. The interview approach, as Arnett notes, is excellent for exploring a topic that has not been studied much and about which not much is known (2006:25). We used excerpts from the interviews to illustrate people's everyday eloquence and thereby demonstrate various thematic patterns common to individuals who experience concurrent love.

Individuals were recruited from a university population that included a sizeable percentage of mature (i.e., over 30-year-old) students. Las Vegas is a very diverse community with most people coming from another state or country. Market research firms have found that Las Vegas is highly representative of mainstream U.S. American society such that if a consumer item is accepted in Las Vegas, it will be accepted in other regions, too.

There were two stages to our study. The first phase was exploratory. Upper division university students were asked if they were ever in a concurrent love situation. Those who affirmed that they had been were invited to participate. If they agreed to participate, they were sent a questionnaire and asked to write about how they met their lovers; each lover's personality; how they managed their concurrent love; and, the anxieties, if any, they felt about their relationships. Lastly, everyone was asked if they remembered their concurrent love experience as satisfying or unsatisfying. Upon the completion of this first phase, our study moved forward to include in-depth, face-to-face interviews that explored these and related questions. The open interview phase enabled us to observe an individual's reaction to our questions which enabled us to ask probing follow-up questions to elicit a richer, more complete explanation of their experiences.

There are 37 students (22 females and 15 males) in the written survey and 27 participants (19 females and eight males) in our face-to-face interview sample. Everyone interviewed was either in college or was a college graduate. Half of our sample included individuals from divorced families, while the other half were from intact homes. At the time of their involvement in concurrent love relationships, the relative age range for men was from their early 20s to late 40s. In contrast, most women were in their late teens or early 20s, with four in their 30s and one in

her 40s. All names used in the study are aliases. The ethnic composition of our sample population is: 46 white (or Anglo), six African-American, and one Chinese-American.

Each participant filled out a baseline form that included age, birthplace, marital status and parents' marital history. Each interview began with asking the person about how they came to be in love with two people at the same time, how they defined love, how they described the state of love felt toward each individual (e.g., passionate or companionship love), and to explain if they experienced an ethical and emotional dilemma while "loving" two different people at the same time. Most people will never experience being in love with two people at the same time. However, based on the percentage of individuals who replied to our query, we estimate that in the U.S. around 25 per cent of the college-educated population has, at one time or another, experienced a concurrent love relationship. Because we wanted to understand the psychological and ethical aspects of the phenomenon we have labelled concurrent love, we did not focus on possible factors that may explain why someone entered into a dual love relationship. Our pilot study was designed to understand how individuals may have experienced being involved within a concurrent love relationship. To this end, everyone was asked to comment on how they tried to emotionally "manage" and ethically balance being in concurrent love relationships.

After only a few interviews, we found individual's accounts of their involvement were remarkably similar to those in the earlier survey sample. By the midpoint of the study, we found recurrent themes and behaviours that cut across gender lines and age cohorts. So powerful was the predictive quality of our analysis that we could often anticipate an individual's comments before they were voiced.

Unlike polyamour relationships where everyone is aware of each other's relationships, the concurrent love relationships we studied are best characterized as a kind of hidden love affair in that the different lovers were initially, and for a long period of time, unaware each other. Our study did not focus on possible factors associated with individuals who stayed in a concurrent love relationship, instead we focused on how individuals defined, reacted to and thus experienced a concurrent love relationship.

## Ethnographic Patterns and Themes

In our participants' stories, several themes emerged regarding concurrent love relationships:

- 1 There are two types of love—one love is a comfort or companionship love, while the other love is a passionate or excited love.

- 2 Individuals justify their concurrent love by appeals to a cognitive or psychic unity—each person constituted a partial or half sphere but, when combined together, formed a cognitive whole of an ideal love.
- 3 Their concurrent love was "managed" through bracketing or compartmentalization of their behaviours to such an extent that most individuals adopted a different persona when interacting with each lover.
- 4 Men and women used similar metaphors and were equally forceful in noting how they were overwhelmed with desire, excitement, anticipation and involvement with being in a concurrent love.
- 5 Everyone acknowledged that their concurrent love produced a recurrent ethical dilemma that arose, in large part, as a result of their inability to make a choice.
- 6 There were sex differences: males were more open than females and admitted to enjoying having sexual relationships with two different women; in contrast, women were indifferent to this fact.
- 7 Regardless of sex, no one was satisfied with being stuck, in the words of a 26-year-old woman, in "my serious and painful dilemma."

We will now discuss each theme in more depth.

## Comfort Love and Passionate Love: A Division of Emotional Labour

The research on love repeatedly finds there are two distinct types of love—companionship (sometimes called comfort or attachment love) and passionate or romantic love—and that each has its own hormonal and neurobiological properties (Hatfield and Rapson 1993; Fisher 2006). Passionate love refers to any intense attraction that involves the intrusive thinking about one person in an erotic context, with the expectation that the feeling will endure for some time into the future.

Psychologists found 12 psycho-physiological characteristics often associated with being in passionate love (Fisher 1996, 2003; Harris 1995:86). These are: (1) thinking that the beloved is "unique"; (2) attention paid to the positive qualities of the beloved; (3) contact or thought of the beloved inducing feelings of "exhilaration," "increased energy," "heart pounding," and intense emotional arousal; (4) in adverse times, feeling connected to the beloved is magnified; (5) "intrusive thinking"; (6) feeling possessive and dependent on the beloved; (7) a desire for "union" with the beloved; (8) a strong sense of altruism and concern for the beloved; (9) a re-ordering of priorities to favour the beloved; (10) sexual attraction for the beloved; (11) "emotional union" takes "precedence over sexual desire"; (12) passionate love is generally temporary (i.e., it can "range

from a few days to a few years), but the limited duration is one distinguishing departure from companionship love" (Fisher 1996:416-417).<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, comfort love is a deep affection felt toward "those with whom our lives are deeply intertwined," and involves feelings of deep friendship, empathic understanding and a concern for another's welfare (Hatfield 1988:193-194; Hatfield and Rapson 1993). It is tacitly understood that comfort love, which often starts with a sexual or erotic component, may or may not retain these as a primary feature. This does not mean companionate love is not without its passions. Percy Shelly, the 19th-century poet, thought passion an integral aspect of both loves, albeit romantic love tended to be more physical, while companionate love more spiritual. It also does not mean that passionate love does not shift with the layering of mutual exchanges into companionate love over time. In fact, we found that at times, as suggested by popular media and literature, the shift from passionate to companionate love plays a role in providing a rationale and context for becoming involved in a second relationship that fulfills a desire for passionate love.

Everyone interviewed shared, more or less, Shelly's insight into how they experienced the different loves. Individuals readily acknowledged they were deeply in love with both lovers, albeit differently, and sexually involved with one and occasionally both. Our interviews further revealed each person had a deep companionship love with one person (usually the first lover) and a passionate love (usually the second or newest) with the other. In addition, no one in our sample admitted to being in love with two companionship lovers or two passionate lovers. In all instances, there was a clear-cut separation—one person was the companionship love and the other was the passionate love.

Respondents noted that their companionship lover had the following personality traits: kind, easy going, considerate, giving, committed to family, and, in general, a "good person" who was more of a "stay at home mom or dad." In contrast, the passionate lover was characterized as someone who was bubbly, lively, fun to be with, exciting, well spoken, aloof and mysterious, and as someone with a strong sexual presence. Several people noted, upon reflection, that the passionate lover had a personality that was more equivalent to "a bad boy" or "a bad girl." In many ways, the passionate lover shared many traits associated in literary accounts with a *femme fatale* or *status fatale* persona (Jankowiak and Ramsey 2000).

The difference between types of lovers can be seen in the following examples: A 32-year-old woman recalled that "John [her second and more passionate lover] does

things for me, he has intensity and unexpectedness to his demeanour I find attractive. Jim [her companionship love] is more down to business. I love him because he loves me and all my kids." A 32-year-old man made a distinction between his lovers. He observed that "one type was sexually powerful and the other was comfortable: she cared about me more and I also thought she understood me more." And, a 27-year-old man acknowledged that "my love for both women was intense but in a very different way."

Another example that illustrates the equally strong but contrasting reasons behind the deep emotional bonds our participants sought to articulate, comes from a 29-year-old woman who admitted that,

I love both men deeply but for different reasons. I wanted one for emotional support. For example, Dave [her first love] is always there for me. He helped me solve my problems. He always encouraged me in everything I tried to do. On the other hand, I wanted Steve [her second or passionate love] physically. I just wanted him so much. I would have someone to make out with. I was passionately attracted to Steve though I always put more importance on Dave.

Later in the interview she qualified her attachment to Steve by noting, "he made me laugh and I felt good about myself. Dave was never good at that. I was totally in love with Steve (her second love) just after a few days, where it took me a year to fall in love with Dave." She was acutely aware that her concurrent love bonds resulted in the reordering of her priorities. She observed that, "after falling in love with Steve everything about Dave started to annoy me. The only thing that bored me about Steve was he was a flirt; he created anxiety and I could not relax and keep focus on maintaining the relationship." Still, she added, "I always got excited when Dave [her first love] instant-messaged me but with Steve this was not so."

A person's first lover was, overwhelmingly, the comfortable love who was considered to be a good man or woman and a potential father or mother. In short, he or she is a life companion. The second lover is seen as exciting, aloof, mysterious, dangerous and potentially a "bad boy" or "bad girl." For example, a 32-year-old woman acknowledged that she was attracted to her second lover because "there was a secret in him that I wanted to discover, even if it took me 20 years." The second lover was a "hot lover" whom she did not consider worthy of marriage. The very qualities that made the person attractive were also the qualities that made them less attractive as a life partner. For example, a 42-year-old woman noted, "He was a charmer but I didn't look at him as father material.

He knows how to spend quality time with me. I enjoy that." On the other hand, she adds, "Carl [her first love] I love because he truly loves me and all my kids. He saw to it that we were all taken care of no matter what."

No one admitted to falling in love with two people they were dating at the same time. For everyone, concurrent love relationships arose when they were already deeply involved in a relationship or were in the process of ending a relationship at the time they met someone new. Unlike a "typical" extra-marital affair, where the individual involved either returns to their first lover or divorces and moves on with their new-found lover, a concurrent love existed in a state of liminality whereby the individual(s) involved refused to make a choice and give up one lover for another. Instead, there was a concerted effort to maintain an ongoing relationship with both lovers. In the individual's mind they had two different kinds of lovers. In fulfilling different desires with each, they had, in a way, achieved an ideal love combining both passionate and companionate love. For example, a 42-year-old woman who was adamant she loved both men, equally noted, "I had the best of both worlds. Each lover had different qualities and I wanted to combine them together. I thought it possible to love both, but in the end, I found I could not." A 28-year-old woman admitted that, "my new lover gave me more first-hand attention compared to my first lover. He told me he cared about what I did and what I liked." She added, "I was attracted to that attention. I want to possess him completely." But then she adds, "when I was faced with having to leave my first love, a kind man who often tried to help me, I found I could not leave him. I wanted to and yet I could not. It was then that I decided I wanted to combine my lovers together and form a perfect whole. But I failed."

### **Justifying Concurrent Love: The "Best or Worst of Both Worlds"**

Our respondents' struggles to unite both types of love into a unified whole is consistent with the Western folk model of love that regards romantic love and comfort love as constituting two ends of a continuum. Given this folk understanding, there is a level of plausibility in the individual's justification for wanting to keep concurrent loves; they are striving to combine features, albeit with different partners, to create a unified whole. For many, there was, at least in the beginning, little or no contradiction. Everyone acknowledged that both lovers were, in their own way, complementary and thus fit into a unified cognitive scheme that appeared plausible, suitable and livable. In striving to produce a rationale for their ideal lover, respondents took attributes and behaviours they

preferred from each and wove them into an imaginary whole. A number of individuals reported, as concurrent love advocates claim, experiencing a deeper, richer and more meaningful satisfaction with their lives because of being involved with multiple lovers. Their satisfaction, however, appears to be relatively brief. Interpersonal conflict arose whenever passionate love shifted to a more comfortable love.

Individuals sought to keep the twin loves separate. This need to keep the cognitive and emotional relationships separate in "tone" accounts, we suspect, for the volatility of interpersonal communications wherein physical and verbal fights erupted with the passionate lover but never the companionship lover. In not wanting to have the passionate love relationship lapse into a more comfortable love, and thus have the two relationships occupy a similar feeling state with overlapping demands, individuals struggled to reinsert some tension and anxiety back into that particular relationship. In the end, their efforts failed.

It is significant that no one who maintained concurrent loves acknowledged being happy, satisfied or nourished emotionally during this time. It speaks loudly to the burdens of departing from a pair-bond relationship organized around emotional exclusivity. For example, a 25-year-old man admitted that "being in love with two women at the same time was one of the most difficult situations I had ever dealt with. The time commitment alone was astonishing. Between two women and my job I didn't have time to relax. Mentally the situation was unbearable." He added, "I felt guilty, especially to Nancy, my first love, but I found Jane so exciting too." He goes on, "Nancy is the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with and Jane is just a strong love passion." Another 27-year-old man acknowledged that, "I liked having multiple sex partners but once it developed into a close relationship I found I was not able to give undivided attention to both lovers. It was very time consuming and emotionally wore me out." Concurring, a 23-year-old woman told us,

I did not like it when I was in love with both of them. It took up much of my time. I started to get depressed. I felt no peace. I got little psychological satisfaction. I also became anti-social. I decided to break it off and focus on school. I was able to bring my GPA up again. I am happier now than I have ever been in the last couple of years.

### **Compartmentalization of Behaviour: The Creation of a Dual Persona**

Although individuals imagined they had created a unified, albeit complex, love that involved two distinct

personalities, they were acutely aware of the importance of keeping the two lovers separate from one another so as not to engender jealousy, and to more effectively manage boundaries and time commitments to reduce cognitive dissonance. Further, respondents noted that it was imperative not to treat each lover the same. To this end, individuals used different means to bracket each relationship ranging from adopting different personas with each lover, maintaining geographic distance between lovers, deliberately seeking to have completely different experiences so that they would be able to create different, and thus non-competing, narrative histories and, in the case of women, using degrees of sexual intimacy to maintain a tacit ranking in their motivational priorities.

Individuals in our sample, much like some bisexuals in concurrent relationships (Weinberg et al. 1994), tried to manage their relationship through bracketing. Bracketing is a cognitive technique that allows individuals to seek to forget, however momentarily, about their conflicting involvements with more than one individual. For example, a 36-year-old woman admitted that she tried to “mentally zero out the lover I was not with. If a lover called, I totally zeroed in [or focused] on the one who called.” She acknowledged that sometimes when she was having sex with one lover, she started to think of the other lover, which she found highly disturbing. Another 23-year-old woman admitted her efforts to create psychological borders often failed. She noted,

At times nothing worked, I couldn't even function or think straight. I was completely preoccupied; I thought about them all the time but my inability to choose paralyzed me. It resulted in me losing both of them. Now I am alone again.

Other individuals were relatively more successful in maintaining their concurrent love. One way was to create separate histories or narratives of their beginnings and activities. This served as a foundation for establishment of anchoring memories that reinforced their mutual commitment. Anchoring memories are symbolic of a strong bonded relationship (Collins and Gregor 1998). They are, therefore, an important index of the presence or absence of intimacy. We found that, for most people, their anchoring memories served, as they had for Collins and Gregor's monogamous couples, as the most emotionally salient memory of their relationship. If the vitality of a relationship is dependent upon having a distinct historical memory that can reinforce a couple's collective identity, then it is essential for individuals involved in a concurrent love to develop couple memories through engaging in different

activities. This is exactly what individuals strived to do. For example, if one lover liked to go dancing, then that individual would not go dancing with the other but rather would go see a movie. If both liked movies, the individual would select action films for one lover, and comedy or horror films for the other. The type of activity was less important than keeping the activities and micro events separate and thus different. Further, several people readily admitted that they took on a different persona with each lover. As one woman admitted, “I truly became a different person when I was with each lover. I wore different clothes, even adjusted my hair style, so I seemed, at least to myself, to become a different person.” Another 34-year-old woman noted that she had to be different with each lover. “If not, I would not be able to stay in love with both.” What stood out in all of the interviews was that individuals were highly cognizant of why this bracketing was important.

Another way individuals sought to maintain boundaries between two loves was the use of geographic distance. Choosing individuals in different cities by maintaining one relationship and starting another after moving to a different city, allowed some to live with their comfort lover while negotiating a long distance affair with their passionate lover. This enabled them to focus on one lover at a time and not have their momentary prioritization undermined by an unexpected appeal from the other lover. Compartmentalizing enabled the individual to momentarily forget they were involved with someone else. Thus, they strove to create the illusion of a single dyadic bond in line with cultural models. For some, these strategies did reduce conflicts that may have arisen from each lover demanding greater focused attention. Most strove, to borrow a line from an old Crosby, Stills and Nash song, “to love the one you're with.” Others adopted a different strategy by momentarily rank ordering their loves: one became their primary lover and the other a secondary lover. These mental acts enabled respondents to “postpone” having to choose between lovers. When the bracketing actions and compartmentalization tactics failed, individuals' ability to keep separate their motivational priorities broke down, resulting in feelings of guilt and deep-seated remorse. For example, a 25-year-old man noted he strove to balance his involvement with two women by talking with both each day. However, he noted that with his first lover, Jamie, he only spoke for five minutes, while with his second, or newest and most passionate lover, Nicole, he always called last and spoke for a long time. When asked why he did not leave Jamie for Nicole, he quickly admitted that,

As the days went by, the warm fuzzy excited feeling I had for Nicole started to deteriorate and my love towards Jamie started to strengthen. I started missing Jamie intensely, and I called her anytime that I could to talk to her. During the first few weeks of dating Nicole, I would always put Jamie on hold or tell her I would call her back. But after a couple of months, I started to do the opposite, putting Nicole on hold all the time or cancelling dates so I would be able to talk to Jamie on the phone. Things eventually didn't work out between Nicole and me, and the relationship between Jamie and me became stronger than ever. I later broke up with Nicole and continue to this very day dating Jamie and I couldn't be any happier. But the feeling of love that I feel towards Jamie is something of greater magnitude. I don't only love her physically, but I also love her mentally and emotionally. I feel as if I can't be without her or spend another day living, knowing that she isn't okay.

His shift in feelings between passionate and a deeply-felt companionship love is representative of others' life stories.

### **Commonalities and Differences in the Experience of Concurrent Love**

With the exception of value placed on sexual pleasure, there was no significant sex difference in the way men and women described their feelings, dilemmas and uncertainties of being in love with more than one person. We did find that men more than women commented on the importance of sexual passion. A 28-year-old man recalled, "I did love her and the sex was so good too." All eight men's comments are descriptions of passionate love that were always intertwined with an emphasis on heightened sexual satisfaction. In the words of one 37-year-old man currently involved in maintaining concurrent love bonds, "I love my wife, she is kind and loyal and will always be there for me, but with Sue [his new and more passionate love] the sex is so good. I never had it that good. She moans and turns and moves her body in such an 'hmm' way." He adds, "I love both women, they give me different things. It is not just sex, there is deep feeling for Sue too ... all my friends say I should give up Sue because she is no good and is using me and I will miss Cathy [his wife]. I really do not know what to do." His angst is typical of the men interviewed in that it highlights the heightened sexual tension that is encompassed in powerful emotional bonds.

Women's comments on sexual desire, on the other hand, were more diffuse. Emphasis on erotic or sexual aspects of the relationship may or may not be noted and, if so, they were noted in passing. Women were adamant in wanting to discuss their emotional entanglement. For

the vast majority, emotional conflict was the primary cornerstone upon which they preferred to organize their memory.

It is notable that women, but not men, used degrees of sexual intimacy as one way to distinguish and rank order, in degrees of relative importance, their two loves. Women indicated that, if they were sexually intimate with one lover, they would not be with the other. A few women viewed sex with both lovers as, in the words of a 22-year-old woman, being "awkward and dirty." No man voiced this concern.

Men's comments revealed a stronger, more emphatic, declaration of the importance of sexual fulfillment and how one woman, usually the newest, was more sexually satisfying. This may reflect a prevalent pattern where men are expected to voice their preference for sexual enjoyment. Men's heightened interest in sexual satisfaction is also consistent with research that finds men more adamant about their need for sexual fulfillment, whereas women tend to blend the sexual into the emotional, so that talking about one implies the other (Baumeister and Tice 2001; Diamond, personal communication 2008). It is important to note that no matter their expressions of the importance of sexual satisfaction, the men we spoke with were willing to struggle, at least for a limited time, with the difficulties attendant with being simultaneously involved with multiple lovers. Further, we found that there was a sex difference in the final choice of lover where our participants felt compelled to choose one or the other. Our results found that 14 out of 41 women ultimately selected, after much anguish, the "good guy," or comfort lover, as their marital or long-term partner; while five out of 23 men, with equal anguish, selected the "good girl" or comfort love. In contrast, 12 men and nine women selected the passionate or newer lover, while 11 respondents (five men, six women) were not able to make a choice and lost both lovers (see Table 1).

Men and women tended to experience excitement and the difficulties of concurrent love more or less the same way. However, as Table 1 reveals, they resolve their cognitive dissonance differently through the choice of which love bond is chosen as primary. Men overwhelmingly placed a high value on passionate love as evident in their choosing that love experience over the more familiar comfort love. In contrast, women showed a preference for the companionate love bond. It is important to note here that none of our respondents had children. We suggest, based on the physiological and neural mechanisms involved in mate selection (Fisher 2002 et al.), that the number of men who selected the companionate love would have been higher if that relationship also involved children.



**TABLE 1**  
**Mate Choice Data**

	Companionship (Good Guy/Girl)	%	Passionate (Bad Guy/Girl)	%	No Choice	%	*Unknown	%
Men (23)	5	22%	12	52%	5	22%	1	4%
Women (41)	14	34%	9	22%	6	15%	12	29%

\*Unknown represents those who, at the time of the survey or interview, had not made a choice or, in a few cases, did not convey whom, if either, they had chosen.

**Discussion**

The statements quoted above concerning the discomfort of trying to live within a concurrent love are highly representative of our sample. Further support comes from our interviews in which each individual was asked if there were any advantages in being in love with two people simultaneously. Everyone quickly answered “None!” They readily and easily admitted that the experience was “not pleasurable,” but something “emotionally stressful.” They also acknowledged that their efforts to gain the “best of both worlds,” by conceptualizing their lovers into an idealized union, failed. Ironically, attempting to create a unified whole through striving to treat each relationship as separate and thus different served less to unify and more to preserve two discrete love bonds. Ultimately, this served to undermine the very cognitive unification they saw as fulfilling. Further, their continuous efforts to hold onto this ideal had a negative impact. Individuals continuously commented on how “frustrated and confused” they felt, and how “stressed out [they were] all the time,” and how simply exhausted they were “with living.”

The desire to forge a greater, more unified, love created the worst of both worlds. For example, a 42-year-old woman admitted that she thought “God was punishing me for getting involved with these men.” Another woman “thought of suicide.” The inability to sustain their commitment to two different relationships that involved different personas proved to be an unstable and untenable situation. The lovers’, and we suspect, the individuals’ desires for emotional and sexual exclusivity proved too powerful.

Why are these relationships so unstable? What accounts for their fragmentation? From a cultural perspective, is it the absence of cultural scripts to provide a guide and ethical justification for forming plural love relationships? Had such scripts existed, would there have been less guilt and better outcomes? If love is a constructed emotion, there should be little or no universal attributes associated with its presence. It should be completely reshaped into anything a community wants it to be, including the denial of love’s very presence. On the

other hand, if love is a universal emotion that has its own psychological and endocrinological properties, it would be difficult for a community to completely reshape love according to its local values.

Passionate love, within a relatively short period, evolves into a more subdued, albeit equally profound and comfortable, companionate love. As a result, it seems, at least for most of the participants in our sample, that as soon as an individual is no longer able to keep his or her concurrent loves separate, an acute cognitive dissonance arises and, with it, an immensely psychological and ethical discomfort. When this occurs, a person’s guilt is heightened.

In the end, the problematic nature of concurrent love may stem from the dyadic nature of love. Only two individuals can co-exist simultaneously on the continuum and then only if they remain within different domains along that continuum.<sup>3</sup> This raises the question: Would the experience of the individuals in our small sample have been any different if they lived in a community that supported plural or concurrent loves? In spite of hopeful claims and positive assertions, other researchers have shown that concurrent love is inherently fragile, unstable and seldom long-lasting (Gillis 2004; Steinberg et al. 2003). We suspect that, while there may occasionally be successful concurrent love relationships, ethnographic and historical studies repeatedly document that it is not feasible on a larger community scale. For example, Zablocki’s (1980) comprehensive sociological research into plural or group love arrangements (in Oneida, Kerista and New Buffalo) found that group love arrangements presented insurmountable difficulties for members. In spite of the claim that plural love is a viable alternative to monogamous love, research has found that sex-inclusive communes and ad hoc individual polyamour bonds never last beyond the lifespan of the founding generation (Berger et al. 1972:244). In fact, in a relatively short time, they are often abandoned in favour of some type of pair bond relationship (Zablocki 1980).

Mormon fundamentalist communities proclaim that the polygamous family is based in a plural love where



everyone should love everyone equally. Research in the community found no evidence that any family had successfully reached this religiously inspired ideal (Jankowiak 1995). Historians have also found little support that the 19th-century Oneida community organized around group or plural love achieved that state or was able to prevent the formation of dyadic love bonds (Foster 1992).

A definitive study on contemporary polyamorous lifestyles has yet to be written. To date, most commentary on the polyamorous lifestyle has been written by insiders who are also practitioners. Leanna Wolfe (Personal communication 2005), an anthropologist who has studied polyamours, admitted in conversation that polyamours, much like the individuals in our study, seem to sustain their complex relationships due, in part, to a division of emotional labour: one person is the passionate lover and the other is the companionship lover. Lisa Diamond's research among long-time polyamours found there was little passion but a lot of comfort (Personal communication 2008). This raises an intriguing possibility: if concurrent love is possible, it will only be among companionship lovers. Clearly, we need a more systematic and in-depth study to understand how individuals manage their plural love bonds as well as the reasons behind the relative success and failure of polyamorous marriages. Further, the inability of our respondents to manage these often competing emotions arises out of their need to reorder motivational priorities that are linked to the formation of an exclusive bond. It is clear from the majority of interviews that individuals in concurrent loves also felt intense guilt. This is evidence for the power of culture to influence emotional and cognitive models and resultant scripts. It is also clear from written accounts and interviews that people quickly became overwhelmed by trying to live with competing emotional experiences. The pull of companionship love and the push of passionate love prove to be too powerful for individuals to effectively manage, especially, we suspect, without cultural scripts and strong societal approval and acceptance to support them. In the end, they simply lost control of their love, their lovers and their relationships.

## Conclusion

Our research findings have implications for the studies of the anthropology of gender, sex and sexuality that have, at times, over-emphasized the difference between men's and women's attitudes toward love and sexuality. We did find that more men than women expressed greater sexual satisfaction in concurrent love relationships. However, men and women were in strong agreement on the importance of trying to blend the two loves into a unified whole. A salient finding was that in every instance, love was a

fundamental value for *both* men and women. Another significant finding is the remarkable similarity in the way men and women voiced their pain and displeasure at being trapped in a concurrent love relationship. Clearly, in the domain of love, men and women are the same.

We did find support for artists and other advocates of concurrent love that humans are capable of deep-seated simultaneous loves. However, concurrent loves seldom last for any significant length of time. Passionate and companionate love have their own neurological, hormonal and cognitive elements that both enable the initiation of concurrent love bonds and undermine efforts to sustain them. Because romantic passion and its sibling, companionate love, have separate endocrinological components, the love states can be distilled and exist separately from one another to a large degree. In time, however, passionate love tends to move toward a more companionship-based, or oxytocin-influenced, love. Whenever that occurs, cognitive dissonance arises as the two lovers that embody these endpoints of the love spectrum can no longer be readily or easily separated or compartmentalized. Because the love experiences now occupy a similar mental category or cognitive geography, dictates of time and emotional commitment create a need to make a choice that the individual, driven by an internal need for both loves, agonizes over making. The blurring of categories and emotional experiences presents a severe challenge to the individual's motivational hierarchy of values that ultimately undermines his or her ability to manage concurrent love relationships. It is the inability to maintain the separate love types that accounts for concurrent love's inherent instability in all but cases of companionate love, though this is also an area that needs more study.

A concurrent love requires a strong dedication to maintain simultaneous, albeit separate, life histories or narratives. For most, these are simply too difficult to sustain. Moreover, the construction of separate personas creates a dual personality that also cannot endure. The very nature of what these individuals hope to achieve fragments their sense of self, in the process, weakening the very foundation of the bond they seek to sustain with another individual. What may have begun as a need to satisfy passion and secure companionship, eventually turns into an acute psychological dilemma that is experienced as intensely dissatisfying and ultimately personally destructive. The inability to resolve the dilemma of merging both types of love into a larger, unified whole underscores the primacy of the dyadic bond that is based more on emotional, rather than sexual, exclusivity. In the end, love's pull toward dyadic exclusiveness conquers all.

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## Notes

- 1 *Psychology Today* in its March-April issue in 2003 had several experts respond to the query "can you be in love with more than one person at the same time?" Their conclusion was that dual or concurrent love can only exist in a state of psychological turmoil and thus it can never be a complete or satisfying experience (Sternberg et al. 2003).
- 2 Passionate love's emotional state may also be manifested behaviourally as "labile psychophysical responses to the loved person, including exhilaration, euphoria, buoyancy, spiritual feelings, increased energy, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, shyness, awkwardness ... flushing, stammering, gazing, prolonged eye contact, dilated pupils ... accelerated breathing, anxiety ... in the presence of the loved person" (Fisher 1996:32).
- 3 Moreover, it may explain why no one in our sample acknowledged being simultaneously in love with three, five or more people at the same time. In fact, everyone thought it was absurd that this could ever be possible.

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